



Valuing Public Services

Amicus Briefing on the Prime Minister's Policy Review paper
'Building on Progress : Public Services'



**VALUING
PUBLIC
SERVICES**



April 2007

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Introduction

In January 2007 Amicus published our 'Valuing Public Services' paper¹ as part of our campaign of the same name. In it we expressed our commitment to public services through six Amicus 'public service values' (these are reproduced at the end of this briefing.) These values and the arguments behind them remain relevant to any discussion about the future of public services.

We want public service reform to reflect these values which we believe will help work towards vibrant and effective public services.

In March 2007 the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit published 'Building on Progress : Public Services'² as part of the Government's Policy Review process.

This paper considers the key elements of the Policy Review paper in the context of Amicus' 'Valuing Public Services' paper.

¹ Available on the Amicus website at www.amicustheunion.org/PDF/Valuing-Public-Services.pdf

² At www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/policy_review/documents/building_on_progress.pdf

'Building on Progress : Public Services'

The Prime Minister's Policy Review paper claims to set out a vision for the future of public services, although in many respects it might also be considered as Tony Blair's review of what has happened to public services over the last ten years.

The story told in the Policy Review paper is one of a need to move from a "monolithic public service" associated with the post-war welfare state to modern public services relevant for the 21st century. The paper reports the "substantial additional investment in, and reform of, public services" in the last ten years but states that "public service reform must be taken a stage further".

The next stage of reform is to be characterised by increased personalisation of services, with a stronger focus on commissioning, competition and contestability.

Personalising Services

The main thrust of the Policy Review paper is the personalising of services (although equity is also cited as a concern) and this provides the basis of the reforms proposed therein.

Five further steps are said to be needed to ensure more personalised services and these are outlined below.

Empowering all citizens

The Review talks of 'empowering all citizens' with particular emphasis given to the personalisation of services and extending choice. In addition, more effective ways for users to express their views ('user voice') are needed.

The Government is encouraged to continue building strong, autonomous public service organisations that are locally accountable. Examples cited include foundation trust hospitals. Social enterprises are said to "have the ability to respond more directly to their local communities" (p40).

Opening up the supply of public services

Opening up the supply of public services is said to enable citizens to find services that best suit their personal needs – "because different people want different things, a broad base of suppliers is needed" (p44).

It is argued that the Government should continue to separate the commissioner of public services from the provider and that any 'in-house' provision should be through an arm's length operation.

Particular emphasis is given to enhancing the role of the third sector including government support to increase the sector's capacity. Reference is also made to strengthening Best Value and procurement rules (p46).

The paper acknowledges that the Government must also focus on improving public sector provision "not least because there will always be some limits to the scope of mixed provision" (p47) (parts of national defence, criminal justice and citizenship are cited as examples where private or third sector provision is inappropriate).

"It is not possible to use contestability in all services" (p47), but there is said to be a case for service-by-service assessment of where contestability could be extended. In this regard consideration should be given to schools, provision of GP services, many local government services, policing, court services and welfare to work. In addition, contestability should be extended to commissioning bodies' services as well as those providing services.

Fostering workforce innovation and development and engaging with the public service workforce.

The paper talks about how the Government has already introduced greater flexibility in the roles of public sector workers. The focus for the next stage of reform is on enhancing flexibility and making broader use of support roles, breaking down demarcations, supporting skills development, and improving engagement with the public service workforce. "Enhancing flexibility" includes giving public bodies more freedom over staff pay and conditions.

It is welcome that the paper acknowledges that "supporting the public service workforce underpins every other action that the Government takes to improve public services" (p56) and that "the Government must not only articulate its plans and ideas for improving public services more clearly, but must listen better to staff and involve them in planning ways to develop and improve service delivery" (p59).

However, the glaring omission is that there is no consideration whatsoever of the role of trade unions (other than a reference to how the Trade Union Learning Fund has enabled workers to develop their skills).

Three in five public sector employees in the UK are union members. Collective agreement coverage is 69% and trade unions are present in 87% of public sector workplaces³. Given this and the work of the Public Services Forum⁴, it is a significant omission not to actively acknowledge the importance of trade unions to the public service reform agenda (rather it is suggested that there should be “panels of public sector workers”). This demonstrates a weakness in thinking in respect of effective and sustainable engagement with the public sector workforce.

Helping the hardest to reach

It is stated that *“the Government’s aim is to ensure that higher quality public services are put in place for all citizens”* (p63) and that therefore particular attention has to be paid to those that are hardest to reach. Policy recommendations to achieve this objective include : raising the aspirations of the most disadvantaged, identifying effective early interventions and deploying them on a larger scale, systematically identifying those most at risk, and targeted funding.

In a separate section the paper refers to *“core services (that) should be free for users at the point of use”* (p11). However, there is no identification of what might constitute ‘core’ and ‘non core’ public services and which should no longer be free at the point of use.

Balancing rights and responsibilities

It is argued that whilst empowered citizens have a right to responsive public services, many of the outcomes sought from public services require changes in individual behaviour – alongside rights come responsibilities.

Examples of policies already in place in this regard include the New Deal in welfare for work, Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) and Parenting Orders. Suggested measures for the next stage of reform include : increased use of citizen-service contracts, setting out clear accounts of entitlements, and ensuring citizens recognise the costs of the services they receive.

³ *Trade Union Membership 2006* (DTI, 2007)

⁴ The Public Services Forum brings together the Government, public service trade unions and employers to promote workforce development.

Valuing Public Services campaign

The Amicus ‘Valuing Public Services’ paper pulls together key issues for Amicus in respect of public services and puts them in a positive framework that identifies some of the things we are for and not just the things we are against. It is based on six Amicus ‘public service values’ (reproduced at the end of this briefing).

Interestingly, as key themes some of our values chime with the headline issues of the Review Paper – ‘valuing public service staff’ and ‘engaging with the workforce’, ‘valuing public service users’ and ‘empowering all citizens’, for example. As such there is an element of common ground in taking forward the public service reform agenda. The key is how to put it into practice. We are not against reform, but we want to ensure reform is sustainable, evidence-based and takes appropriate consideration of public service staff and their representatives.

The report states that *“The empirical evidence is there...it is time to complete the work”* (p7). However, despite the assertions the evidence is not clear⁵.

The emphasis given to the increased marketisation of public services is damaging the trust of the people who use public services and the staff who deliver them. The fragmentation of public services is not delivering value for money and is damaging the public service ethos.

The market is not an appropriate mechanism for the delivery and regulation of some public services. Gordon Brown has been explicit about this saying in respect of healthcare, for example, that *“there is clearly a public interest question that means healthcare cannot be treated like a normal market”*⁶ and *“public provision is likely to achieve more at less cost to efficiency and without putting at risk the gains from the ethic of public service where, at its best, dedicated public servants put duty, obligation and service before profit or personal reward”*⁷.

The public value public services and they value their ‘publicness’.

In addition, whilst outcomes are important, a focus on ‘what works’ should not exclude the importance of *how* things work. The processes of public service delivery – not least perceptions of fairness - matter⁸.

⁵ See for example, Pollock. A., et al. *An Examination of the UK Treasury’s Evidence Base for the Cost and Time Overrun Data in UK Value-for-money Policy and Appraisal* (Public Money and Management. April 2007)

⁶ Speech to Social Market Foundation, 20th March 2002

⁷ Speech to Social Market Foundation, 3rd February 2003

⁸ Pearce. N., *Fair Rules : rethinking fairness* (Public Policy Research, ippr, March-May 2007)

Conclusion

The Prime Minister's Policy Review paper 'Building on Progress : Public Services' assesses public service reform over the last ten years and maps a vision for the next ten. However, the extent to which this represents the full picture for the future of public services for Tony Blair's successor remains to be seen.

Amicus has also identified some key issues in respect of public services which are contained in our 'Valuing Public Services' paper and include the Amicus 'public service values'. These values and the arguments behind them remain relevant to any discussion about the future of public services.

We want public service reform to reflect these values which we believe will help work towards vibrant and effective public services.

Amicus Public Service Values

Valuing public service users and staff - Public services are about the experiences of public service users and depend on the staff delivering those services.

Accountability - Public services need to be properly accountable to users, staff and local communities.

Long-term commitment - Public services need long-term commitment not short-term fixes. This requires financial and political investment.

Universal access - Public service means access for all. This should not be restricted through 'choice', 'competition' and 'contestability'.

End to market madness - Privatisation (including PFI/PPP) is fragmenting public services and not delivering value for money.

Sustainability - Sustainable progress requires an element of stability. Reform should be based on sound arguments not tidal waves of initiatives.